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THE WAY THE WORLD IS

NELSON GOODMAN

1. *Introduction*

Philosophers sometimes mistake features of discourse for features of the subject of discourse. We seldom conclude that the world consists of words just because a true description of it does, but we sometimes suppose that the structure of the world is the same as the structure of the description. This tendency may even reach the point of linguomorphism when we conceive the world as comprised of atomic objects corresponding to certain proper names, and of atomic facts corresponding to atomic sentences. A *reductio ad absurdum* blossoms when an occasional philosopher maintains that a simple description can be appropriate only if the world is simple; or asserts (and I have heard this said in all seriousness) that a coherent description will be a distortion unless the world happens to be coherent. According to this line of thinking, I suppose that before describing the world in English we ought to determine whether it is written in English, and that we ought to examine very carefully how the world is spelled.

Obviously enough the tongue, the spelling, the typography, the verbosity of a description reflect no parallel features in the world. Coherence is a characteristic of descriptions, not of the world: the significant question is not whether the world is coherent, but whether our account of it is. And what we call the simplicity of the world is merely the simplicity we are able to achieve in describing it.

But confusion of the sort I am speaking of is relatively transparent at the level of isolated sentences, and so relatively less dangerous than the error of supposing that the structure of a veridical systematic description mirrors forth the structure of the world. Since a system has basic or primitive terms or elements

¹ This paper was read at Princeton University in November, 1955, and has since been read at Harvard and Brandeis Universities.

and a graded hierarchy built out of these, we easily come to suppose that the world must consist of corresponding atomic elements put together in similar fashion. No theory advocated in recent years by first-rate philosophers seems more obviously wrong than the picture theory of language. Yet we still find acute philosophers resorting under pressure to a notion of absolutely simple qualities or particles. And most of those who avoid thinking of the world as uniquely divisible into absolute elements still commonly suppose that *meanings* do resolve thus uniquely, and so accept the concealed absolutism involved in maintaining the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions.

In this paper, however, I am not concerned with any of the more specific issues I have just touched upon, but with a more general question. I have been stressing the dangers of mistaking certain features of discourse for features of the world. This is a recurrent theme with me, but even this is not my main concern here. What I want to discuss is an uncomfortable feeling that comes upon me whenever I warn against the confusion in question. I can hear the anti-intellectualistic, the mystic—my arch enemy—saying something like this: “Yes, that’s just what I’ve been telling you all along. All our descriptions are a sorry travesty. Science, language, perception, philosophy—none of these can ever be utterly faithful to the world as it is. All make abstractions or conventionalizations of one kind or another, all filter the world through the mind, through concepts, through the senses, through language; and all these filtering media in some way distort the world. It is not just that each gives only a partial truth, but that each introduces distortion of its own. We never achieve even in part a really faithful portrayal of the way the world is.”

Here speaks the Bergsonian, the obscurantist, seemingly repeating my own words and asking, in effect, “What’s the difference between us? Can’t we be friends?” Before I am willing to admit that philosophy must make alliances that strange, I shall make a determined effort to formulate the difference between us. But I shall begin by discussing some preliminary, related questions.

2. *The Way the World is Given*

Perhaps we can gain some light on the way the world is by examining the way it is given to us in experience. The question of the given has a slightly musty sound these days. Even hardened philosophers have become a little self-conscious about the futility of their debates over the given, and have the grace to rephrase the issue in terms of "ground-elements" or "protocol-sentences." But in one way or another we hear a good deal about getting down to the original, basic, bare elements from which all knowledge is manufactured. Knowing is tacitly conceived as a processing of raw material into a finished product; and an understanding of knowledge is thus supposed to require that we discover just what the raw material is.

Offhand, this seems easy enough. Carnap wanted the ground-elements of his system in the *Aufbau* to be as nearly as possible epistemologically primary. In order to arrive at these, he says, we must leave out of ordinary experience all the results of any analysis to which we subject what we initially receive. This means leaving out all divisions along spatial or qualitative boundaries, so that our elements are big lumps, each containing everything in our experience at a given moment. But to say this is to make artificial temporal divisions; and the actual given, Carnap implies, consists not of these big lumps, but of one single stream.

But this way of arriving at the given assumes that the processes of knowing are all processes of analysis. Other philosophers have supposed rather that the processes are all processes of synthesis, and that the given therefore consists of minimal particles that have to be combined with one another in knowing. Still other thinkers hold that both these views are too extreme, and that the world is given in more familiar medium-size pieces, to which both analysis and synthesis are applied. Thus in views of the given we find duplicated the monism, atomism, and the intermediate pluralisms of metaphysics. But which view of the given is right?

Let's look at the question more closely. The several views do not differ about what is contained in the given, or what can be found there. A certain visual presentation, all agree, contains certain colors, places, designs, etc.; it contains the least perceptible

particles and it is a whole. The question is not whether the given is a single undifferentiated lump or contains many tiny parts; it is a whole comprised of such parts. The issue is not *what* is given but *how* it is given. Is it *given* as a single whole or is it *given as* many small particles? This captures the precise issue—and at the same time discloses its emptiness. For I do not think any sense can be made of the phrase “*given as*.” That an experience is given as several parts surely does not mean that these parts are presented torn asunder; nor can it mean that these parts are partitioned off from one another by perceptible lines of demarcation. For if such lines of demarcation are there at all, they are there within the given, for any view of the given. The nearest we could come to finding any meaning to the question what the world is *given as* would be to say that this turns on whether the material in question is apprehended with a kind of feeling of wholeness or a feeling of broken-upness. To come that near to finding a meaning for *given as* is not to come near enough to count.

So I am afraid we can get no light on the way the world is by asking about the way it is given. For the question about the way it is given evaporates into thin air.

3. *The Way the World is to be Seen*

Perhaps we shall get further by asking how the world is best seen. If we can with some confidence grade ways of seeing or picturing the world according to their degrees of realism, of absence of distortion, of faithfulness in representing the way the world is, then surely by reading back from this we can learn a good deal about the way the world is.

We need consider our everyday ideas about pictures for only a moment to recognize this as an encouraging approach. For we rate pictures quite easily according to their approximate degree of realism. The most realistic picture is the one most like a color-photograph; and pictures become progressively less realistic, and more conventionalized or abstract, as they depart from this standard. The way we see the world best, the nearest pictorial approach to the way the world is, is the way the camera sees it. This version of the whole matter is simple, straightforward, and quite

generally held. But in philosophy as everywhere else, every silver lining has a big black cloud—and the view described has everything in its favor except that it is, I think, quite wrong.

If I take a photograph of a man with his feet towards me, the feet may come out as large as his torso. Is this the way I normally or properly see the man? If so, then why do we call such a photograph distorted? If not, then I can no longer claim to be taking the photographic view of the world as my standard of faithfulness.

The fact of the matter is that this 'distorted' photograph calls our attention to something about seeing that we had ignored. Just in the way that it differs from an ordinary 'realistic' picture, it reveals new facts and possibilities in visual experience. But the 'distorted' photograph is a rather trivial example of something much more general and important. The 'distortion' of the photograph is comparable to the distortion of new or unfamiliar styles of painting. Which is the more faithful portrait of a man—the one by Holbein or the one by Manet or the one by Sharaku or the one by Durer or the one by Cézanne or the one by Picasso? Each different way of painting represents a different way of seeing; each makes its selection, its emphasis; each uses its own vocabulary of conventionalization. And we need only look hard at the pictures by any such artist to come to see the world in somewhat the same way. For seeing is an activity and the way we perform it depends in large part upon our training. I remember J. B. Neumann saying that once when he happened to see the faces of a movie audience in the reflected glare of the screen he first realized how an African sculptor saw faces. What we regard as the most realistic pictures are merely pictures of the sort that most of us, unfortunately, are brought up on. An African or a Japanese would make a quite different choice when asked to select the pictures that most closely depict what he sees. Indeed our resistance to new or exotic ways of painting stems from our normal lethargic resistance to retraining; and on the other hand the excitement lies in the acquisition of new skill. Thus the discovery of African art thrilled French painters and they learned from it new ways to see and paint. What is less often realized is that the discovery of European art is exciting to the African sculptor for the same reason; it shows him a new

way of seeing, and he, too, modifies his work accordingly. Unfortunately, while European absorption of African often results in an artistic advance, African adoption of European style almost always leads to artistic deterioration. But this is for incidental reasons. The first is that social deterioration of the African is usually simultaneous with the introduction of European art. The second reason is rather more intriguing: that while the French artist was influenced by the best of African art, the African was fed no doubt on calendar art and pin-up girls. Had he seen Greek and Mediaeval sculpture instead, the results might have been radically different. But I am digressing.

The upshot of all this is that we cannot find out much about the way the world is by asking about the best or most faithful or most realistic way of seeing or picturing it. For the ways of seeing and picturing are many and various; some are strong, effective, useful, intriguing, or sensitive; others are weak, foolish, dull, banal, or blurred. But even if all the latter are excluded, still none of the rest can lay any good claim to be the way of seeing or picturing the world the way it is.

4. *The Way the World is to be Described*

We come now to a more familiar version of the question of the way the world is. How is the world to be described? Does what we call a true description faithfully depict the world?

Most of us have ringing in our ears Tarski's statement that "it is raining" is true if and only if it is raining, as well as his remark (I think erroneous, but that is beside the point here) that acceptance of this formula constitutes acceptance of a correspondence theory of truth. This way of putting the matter encourages a natural tendency to think of truth in terms of mirroring or faithful reproduction; and we have a slight shock whenever we happen to notice the obvious fact that the sentence "it is raining" is about as different as possible from the rainstorm. This disparity is of the same sort for a true as for a false description. Luckily, therefore, we need not here concern ourselves with the difficult technical matter of the nature of truth; we can confine our attention to admittedly true descriptions. What we must face is

the fact that even the truest description comes nowhere near faithfully reproducing the way the world is.

A systematic description of the world, as I noted earlier, is even more vulnerable to this charge; for it has explicit primitives, routes of construction, etc., none of them features of the world described. Some philosophers contend, therefore, that if systematic descriptions introduce an arbitrary artificial order, then we should make our descriptions unsystematic to bring them more into accord with the world. Now the tacit assumption here is that the respects in which a description is unsatisfactory are *just those respects in which it falls short of being a faithful picture*; and the tacit goal is to achieve a description that as nearly as possible gives a living likeness. But the goal is a delusive one. For we have seen that even the most realistic way of picturing amounts merely to one kind of conventionalization. In painting, the selection, the emphasis, the conventions are different from but no less peculiar to the vehicle, and no less variable, than those of language. The idea of making verbal descriptions approximate pictorial depiction loses its point when we understand that to turn a description into the most faithful possible picture would amount to nothing more than exchanging some conventions for others.

Thus neither the way the world is given nor any way of seeing or picturing or describing it conveys to us the way the world is.

5. *The Way the World Is*

We come now to the question : what, then, is the way the world is? Am I still threatened with the friendship of my enemies? It looks very much that way, for I have just reached the mystic's conclusion that there is no representation of the way the world is. But if our accord seems on the surface to have been reinforced, a second look will show how it has been undermined, by what we have been saying.

The complaint that a given true description distorts or is unfaithful to the world has significance in terms of some grading of descriptions according to faithfulness, or in terms of a difference in degree of faithfulness between true descriptions and good pictures. But if we say that all true descriptions and good pictures

are equally unfaithful, then in terms of what sample or standard of relative faithfulness are we speaking?⁹ We have no longer before us any clear notion of what faithfulness would be. Thus I reject the idea that there is some test of realism or faithfulness in addition to the tests of pictorial goodness and descriptive truth. There are very many different equally true descriptions of the world, and their truth is the only standard of their faithfulness. And when we say of them that they all involve conventionalizations, we are saying that no one of these different descriptions is *exclusively* true, since the others are also true. None of them tells us *the* way the world is, but each of them tells us *a* way the world is.

If I were asked what is *the food* for men, I should have to answer "none." For there are many foods. And if I am asked what is the way the world is, I must likewise answer, "none." For the world is many ways. The mystic holds that there is some way the world is and that this way is not captured by any description. For me, there is no way which is the way the world is; and so of course no description can capture it. But there are many ways the world is, and every true description captures one of them. The difference between my friend and me is, in sum, the enormous difference between absolutism and relativism.

Since the mystic is concerned with the way the world is and finds that the way cannot be expressed, his ultimate response to the question of the way the world is must, as he recognizes, be silence. Since I am concerned rather with the ways the world is, my response must be to construct one or many descriptions. The answer to the question "What is the way the world is?⁹ What are the ways the world is?" is not a shush, but a chatter.

6. *Postscript*

Near the beginning of this paper, I spoke of the obvious falsity of the picture theory of language. I declared rather smugly that a description does not picture what it describes, or even represent the structure of what it describes. The devastating charge against the picture theory of language was that a description cannot represent or mirror forth the world as it is. But we have since observed that a picture doesn't do this either. I began by dropping

the picture theory of language and ended by adopting the language theory of pictures. I rejected the picture theory of language on the ground that the structure of a description does not conform to the structure of the world. But I then concluded that there is no such thing as the structure of the world for anything to conform or fail to conform to. You might say that the picture theory of language is as false and as true as the picture theory of pictures; or in other words, that what is false is not the picture theory of language but a certain absolutistic notion concerning both pictures and language. Perhaps eventually I shall learn that what seems most obviously false sometimes isn't.

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